Miami's First Baby and City's Oldest House

By JOHN VOSBURGH
Herald Staff Writer

Who was the first baby born in Miami? That is, except for the Indians.

The six half-brothers and half-sisters of Henry J. Wagner don't have any doubt about it. It was Henry J. Wagner and they will stake out a sturdy claim to back it up.

They even have an entry under births in the old family album of their mother, Mrs. Adam C. Richards, which says: "Henry J. Wagner, Sept. 17, 1871." The album is in the possession of Mr. Maud Black, Henry's half-sister, who lives at Rt. 2, Box 93, Old Cutler rd.

The other half-sisters and half-brothers of Wagner—who fell off a ladder and died of the injuries in 1944 in Massachusetts at the age of 73—are:

Mrs. Laura Richards Klopp of Homestead, born 1883.

Mrs. Cora Dietrich, 260 NW 24th st., born 1885.

Charles Richards, 661 NW 28th st., born 1887.

Harley J. Richards, 260 NW 24th st., born 1889.

Arthur Richards, Seffner, Fla., born 1896.

The Richards boys and girls and Henry J. Wagner had the same mother, Rose Elizabeth Wagner.

Henry Wagner seldom mentioned his father but in a manuscript on early Miami which he left with Mrs. Black he wrote. "My father came to Miami in 1870, left again soon after I was born, headed for South America and was never heard from again after leaving Key West."

His father's name was Drew and even the six half-brothers and half-sisters don't know Mr. Drew's first name.

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Adopted by Grandfather

YOUNG HENRY was adopted by his grandfather, William Wagner, who came here from Charleston, S.C., in 1855 and took up homesteading. The boy dropped the name of Drew and took that of Wagner.

Henry's mother had come to Miami in 1858 at the age of 6 with her mother from Charleston, S.C. to join her father, Wagner had been storekeeper at Fort Moultrie, S.C. before taking a similar post at Fort Dallas here, then going into homesteading.

Some time after Henry Wagner's father disappeared, his mother met Adam C. Richards, a young homesteader, and the couple married Sept. 5, 1876. William Wagner had built a small Catholic chapel the same year and the ceremony took place there.

The ceremony was performed by the Rev. J. L. Hogon, a priest from Key West.

Young Richards had landed in Miami more or less by accident. Originally from Canton, O., he had heard of riches to be made in Venezuela and set sail for that country where he became stranded. The American consul got him back to Key West on a warship. There he took the Miami boat, expecting to go back North. The boat went no farther, however, so Richards began homesteading 160 acres near Wagner's place.

Speaking of Henry Wagner's birthplace the other day, his sister, Mrs. Klopp, revealed new evidence on what is probably the oldest house in Miami.

"Yes," Mrs. Klopp said, "Henry was born in the second house built by my Grandfather Wagner. It was still standing eight years ago out around NW 11th st. and 8th ave."

A trip to that vicinity showed the house still standing—at 1145 NW 8th ave. in what is known as Highland Park. The present owners, Mr. and Mrs. B. B. Cassell, like Mrs. Klopp, say the house was built about 1866. This would make it the oldest house in Greater Miami.

"We bought it in 1909 from the A. J. Bendle Co., a real estate firm," Mrs. Cassell said. "Mr. (Adam) Richards had sold it to Bendle in 1906, according to the abstract."

"The Richards's lived near here and often came back to the old house," Cassell said. "They often said Mrs. Richards' father, William Wagner, built it in the 1860's."

"About 1896," Mrs. Cassell said. "Actually the house was given to us after we bought our lot from Bendle Co. We moved the house about 50 feet south to our lot."

The beams are hand-hewn, heart-of-pine—Dade county pine. The foundation beams are adzed logs. The heavy planking in the doors and walls were floated here on flat-boats from Pensacola, Richards used to say.

"Dr. Jackson for whom Jackson Memorial Hospital was named, used to visit us," Mrs. Cassell said. "One day I told him I was going to get rid of one of the old doors. He told me he wouldn't take $1,000 for one of those old plank doors—so they're still there."

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Wooden Pegs for Nails

WAGNER USED wooden pegs instead of nails and the way he morticed the beams and crosspieces would gladden the heart of any craftsman.

Adam Richards was the first Dade county tax collector and assessor, a United States marshal and federal census-taker. He tramped the length and breadth of Dade county—then much larger than it is now—from Jupiter to Elliot's Key, collecting taxes and taking the census. He reported a population of 91 in 1880. Miami was not incorporated as a town until July 28, 1896.

The family still has his tax collection book. In 1878 Richards collected a total of $75.75 in property taxes, the largest taxpayer being W. B. Brickell with $15.50 and the smallest a German immigrant, John Adams, who later committed suicide, with 75 cents.

Henry Wagner worked at his grandfather's starch mill and later became a sailor on the boat to Key West and on the yacht of a Frenchman called Count Jean D'Hedouville, who lived in Coconut Grove. Wagner's description of life in early Miami was partially published in The Miami Herald, Jan. 2, 1945 and in complete form in the No. 9 volume of "Tequesta," quarterly publication of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, in 1949.

NEWLY DISCLOSED INFORMATION INDICATES THIS IS MIAMI'S OLDEST
. . . porch on house at 1145 NW Eighth ave. was not part of original structure

INSIDE OLDEST HOUSE . . . BUILT IN 1866
. . . planks for door floated in on flatboat

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OLDEST HOUSE IN 1909 AFTER 50-FOOT MOVE
. . . shingles and siding were repaired